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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001120

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: OTHER SHOE DROPS: VESHNYAKOV OUT OF CEC

REF: A. (A) 06 MOSCOW 12498

[1](#)B. (B) MOSCOW 870

Classified By: DCM Daniel A. Russell for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Many commentators attribute President Putin's failure to re-appoint Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov to his public criticism of election law changes that were initiated by the Kremlin-backed party United Russia. Although many will miss Veshnyakov's even-handed administration of the CEC, two bitter liberal politicians described him as a pawn who had served Putin's purposes, then been ejected. Putin CEC appointee Igor Fedorov, who hails from the Presidential Administration, St. Petersburg, and possibly the KGB, seems likely to replace Veshnyakov as the next CEC chairman. Under Veshnyakov, the CEC presided over a transition that saw much movement towards the managed, two-party system that the Kremlin has sought in advance of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. Although Veshnyakov's departure was not pretty, another job for him in the Putin Administration cannot be ruled out. End summary.

Surprise Omission

[1](#)2. (C) The March 13 publication of Putin's decree naming his five allotted representatives to the fifteen-member Central Election Commission (CEC) excluded incumbent Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov, who had hoped to serve a third four-year term as CEC Chairman. Many commentators attribute Veshnyakov's exclusion to his public criticism of United Russia-initiated amendments to election laws which dispensed with the "against all" option, removed the requirement for a minimum voter turnout, and made it easy to remove candidates from the ballot on technicalities (ref a). In a February 28 meeting with the Ambassador (ref b), Veshnyakov had been cautiously optimistic that he would retain his position. His exclusion came as a shock. On March 13, CEC International Relations staffer Olga Balashova told us that the news had been a great surprise to her and other CEC staffers.

[1](#)3. (C) LDPR's Aleksey Mitrofanov told us that Veshnyakov had been ousted because he had created a "ministry of electoral affairs," rather than a commission for counting votes. Center for Political Technologies analyst Aleksey Makarkin agreed, pointing out that Veshnyakov had tried to work as a partner of the Kremlin, instead of as its client.

[1](#)4. (U) Those on the more liberal (and bitter) end of the spectrum were less generous about Veshnyakov's legacy. Yabloko Chairman Grigoriy Yavlinskiy accused Veshnyakov of executing every order Putin gave him. Independent Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov, noting that that Veshnyakov's term

encompassed Putin's period of rule, held the CEC Chairman responsible for "destroying democracy" in Russia.

The New CEC

15. (SBU) Maya Grishina, a Presidential Administration CEC representative, told us March 13 that the new CEC would not convene until after March 26. It will comprise six new members (the 2003 turnover saw seven new members), but the tenor of its work will hinge on the new chairperson. Igor Fedorov, one of President Putin's appointees, is favored to succeed Veshnyakov. He is a former advisor to the Presidential Administration on internal affairs, a St. Petersburg native, and is rumored to have worked for the KGB. Balashova hoped that there would not be great structural changes in the new CEC, but regretted the loss of respected professionals such as Olga Zastrozhnaya and Vladimir Lysenko.

Comment

16. (C) Veshnyakov's success in providing the Kremlin with the "dress rehearsal" election that it wanted, and thereby smoothing the way for managed, multi-party Duma and presidential elections, raises the possibility that the Kremlin will find a place for his professionalism and talents elsewhere in the Putin Administration. On the other hand, the belief that Veshnyakov's downfall was traceable to his increasing outspokenness has sparked rumors here that he may opt for a future in politics; perhaps with For A Just Russia.

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17. (C) With little time left before the Duma and presidential elections, Veshnyakov's successor will have scant opportunity to make major changes in the workings of the CEC. The new chairperson, however, will set the tone for the December 2007 Duma and the March 2008 presidential elections through the CEC's interpretation of the controversial amendments to the electoral law. While Veshnyakov spoke out forcefully against technical exclusions of parties and candidates, his success in preventing the practice was uneven, and his acquiescence to Yabloko's removal in St. Petersburg was proof of the limits of his influence.
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